



FARM TO TABLE BY POST

Drawings by G. E. Wolfe

By A. S. BURLESON, Postmaster General

KEEPING mail on ice sounds bizarre, and yet that is what the Postoffice Department has done to prevent parcels of perishable goods from spoiling. At the same time an opportunity is now offered inventors to devise a cheap thermatic container that will keep things hot or cold for twenty-four hours. When such a container has been devised and placed within the reach of post-office patrons it will be possible to get soup, — hot soup: not of the kind mother *used* to make, but the soup she herself makes five hundred miles away.

At present the chief obstacle to the greater expansion of the parcel post system, especially that branch of it which concerns marketing by mail, with the object of reducing the high cost of living, is that of temperature, the chief element in the case. With the advent of cool weather this obstacle eliminates itself. A pound or five pounds of butter can be safely sent by mail in wintertime simply well wrapped; but in summer butter may not be sent unless in a thermatic container, or at least a liquid-proof container, so that the melting butter will not run over.

Butter and lard form two of the chief articles of food sent by means of the parcel post under the farm-to-table or producer-to-consumer plan inaugurated by the Postoffice Department last spring. It has been planned to bring the farmers in the outlying districts of large cities in close touch with the people; and so far the results obtained leave nothing to desire, when we consider that the idea has been in operation only a few months. Many producers are coöperating to the extent of advertising in the daily newspapers choice articles at low prices for exclusive parcel post trade.

Ten cities were designated last March for trial of the parcel post as a vehicle of direct exchange between producers and consumers, and reports received from the postmasters of Washington, Boston, Baltimore, St. Louis, Atlanta, Birmingham (Alabama), San Francisco, Rock Island (Illinois), La Crosse (Wisconsin), and Lynn (Massachusetts) show that the new service is welcomed by the public. Lack of information about the service and its facilities is preventing many would-be patrons from taking advantage of the plan, notwithstanding the fact that postmasters everywhere will welcome requests for information. In my opinion the farm-to-city table service, despite a few existing difficulties or obstacles, has come to stay. Its utility is proved. Rapid growth will depend on and will be guaranteed by numerous inventions of new containers and improvements in the service wherever needed. In coöperation with the Office of Markets of the Department of Agriculture, the Postoffice Department is actively working to eliminate the causes of complaints directly due to improper packing. The Department of Agriculture has been, and is, devoting no little attention to the study of containers, especially for perishable goods like poultry, lard, and dairy products.

Although the postal authorities designated ten cities to try out the farm-to-table idea, the service has not been limited to the places mentioned because the latter



were selected for experiment in pushing and advertising this method of exchange. Without exploitation, without the publication of lists of farmers anxious to sell and of consumers anxious to buy, direct exchange has nevertheless developed into an important factor in the business of many other postoffices and localities.

IT is pertinent to remark that not all saving made possible by means of postoffice marketing is a matter of dollars or cents. A patron of the St. Louis postoffice says that she purchased fifteen pounds of lard from a producer in the country which, including container and postage, cost about the same as the price quoted in the local market. The lard, however, was of superior quality and lasted a little more than twice as long as similarly priced lard purchased from local dealers, making the actual cost less than half that of the same article purchased in the city. Fifty country-cured hams were disposed of in one shipment from Atlanta, as a result of an article in one of the newspapers there outlining this farm-to-table feature. The price quoted to the purchasers, including postage, was less than current market price, while the hams were of fine quality, according to Postmaster Bolling H. Jones.

In nearly all the ten cities mentioned the shipment by post of the more perishable articles, such as butter and dressed poultry, fell off during the midsummer months, owing to extreme heat. Under the best conditions from eight to twenty-four hours, according to distance, elapse between despatch and delivery, and it has been found that butter or lard will melt when exposed so long an interval without refrigeration. Postmaster Charles W. Fay of San Francisco reports that, to make it absolutely certain that no perishable matter be held over, the addressee was notified by telephone, so that parcels not delivered on the last trip in the afternoon could be called for by the consignee in the evening if desired. The postmasters seem to agree, however, that a large increase in the number of packages handled was to be expected in the fall and winter, and it is believed that the obstacles to hot weather shipments will be overcome ere another summer comes.

A count recently completed by the railway mail service brought out the fact that the average of damage to shipments in transit was less than one-tenth of one per cent. These instances are about the only cause of the

few complaints that have been received. Moreover, the damage has been due to improper packing. Success of the parcel post depends largely upon proper packing. Mere number of sheets of paper or feet of twine used in wrapping and tying a package does not constitute proper packing. The thing to remember first and last is to adapt proper packing to the article to be mailed, and if in doubt, the best way is to inquire of the postmaster.

STATISTICS made public by the Department of Agriculture with regard to eggs show some interesting facts, resulting from tests carried out for their shipment by post. In the course of these experiments 9,131 eggs were shipped in 466 lots. Of these 327 eggs were broken; but a very small percentage of the whole was absolutely wasted.

On this point the officials of the Department of Agriculture give valuable advice in the way of marketing eggs by mail. First of all, proper packing is essential. This implies time, care, and some attention, and in their opinion no attempt should be made to market by parcel post any but the finest quality of eggs; for they alone will bring remunerative prices. This can be done only by candling them. Thus the drawback to marketing eggs appears to be the time and trouble in packing them; but there is compensation in the extra price that can always be obtained for products that are strictly fresh and absolutely reliable.

The shipper's success, in selling by parcel post, depends upon the care with which he safeguards the reputation of his products. Satisfied customers will soon build up his business for him. Naturally the larger the shipments the producer can arrange to make, the cheaper he can afford to sell his goods. In the case of eggs, for instance, a package of one dozen would require seven cents' postage for the first and second zones. If another dozen were included in the same package the postage would be about nine cents, or four and a half cents, instead of seven cents, a dozen. As eggs form a staple commodity for which there is always great demand, their sale by parcel post particularly lends itself to the individual whose flock of hens is too small or who lives too far from express service to permit him to ship his eggs in the regular commercial case that holds thirty dozen eggs.

ALONG with their reports the postmasters transmitted to the department hundreds of newspaper clippings, which make it clear that public opinion in the larger cities is strongly supporting the farm-to-table-by-post idea. In a few localities, some of the reports show, the farmers and truck gardeners have set back the expansion of the service to some extent by naming prices that, by comparison with the prices quoted in the local markets, have been considered too high by city buyers. As Postmaster Harry B. Simpson of Rock Island describes it, "It seems that each wants the whole amount of the savings, the producer asking the city retail price, while the consumer expects to buy at the